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Mexico Steels Itself for Hard-Liner U.S. Envoy

Appointment of Negroponte Fuels Suspicion About Interventionism in Name of Security

By SERGIO MUNOZ

In a move that was bold, and perhaps clever, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari this week accepted John D. Negroponte as the next U.S. ambassador to Mexico. The move was bold because Negroponte's nomination had not even been officially announced, much less confirmed. It may have been clever if, in doing so, Salinas got the upper hand over another challenge from his political opposition.

When the rumor of Negroponte's promotion began circulating in Mexico City, the left demanded that Salinas reject him. His reputation as an accomplished interventionist had preceded him, and he was considered a threat to Mexico's sovereignty.

Salinas was put in a most uncomfortable position as the press and some in his own party—even some in his own cabinet—joined in the cry of "Yankee, stay home!" Rejecting an ambassador is seldom done. Yet if Salinas accepted Negroponte without complaint, he would be accused of being soft by his own supporters, and he would be savagely attacked by his opposition as a "yes-man" to U.S. policy.

To further complicate things for Salinas, the Negroponte dispute arose at the worst possible time, just when the debate on how to reformulate relations with the United States was taking place within the inner circles of the government.

For three months a honeymoon of sorts had developed between both of the incoming administrations. At least that was the impression on the Mexican side. From Salinas on down, all of the officials who traveled to Houston to meet with President-elect George Bush returned optimistic, believing that there was good will in Washington to understand and help Mexico.

Even before Houston, Mexico was working toward less confrontational, friendlier and more "businesslike" relations with the United States. It was within this spirit that the designation of Fernando Solana Morales as foreign minister and Gustavo Petricioli as ambassador to Washington were to be read both in Mexico and in the United States.

The popular perception in Mexico—until the affair of the infamous border ditch—was that the United States would help to alleviate the burden of the debt, which would mean economic recovery and the end of the political turmoil that has kept the government party preoccupied.

Then, along comes Negroponte, and word of his hawkish past sends chills throughout the nation, raising again the question of the United States' intentions.

Negroponte's record, indeed, proves him to be a man of unbending interventionist zeal. He was the junior diplomat who argued that the United States had a moral commitment to support South Vietnam at any cost; the negotiator who criticized the abilities of his boss, Henry Kissinger, considering him ineffective in dealing with the North Vietnamese; the career-minded diplomat who went to Honduras to run the Contras and became the proconsul of that country; the security-council official who was instrumental in denying assistance to Nicaragua when it was devastated by Hurricane Joan last fall.

These are, however, only the factual highlights of a productive career in gunboat diplomacy. There are also assumptions and questions that his nomination raises.

Given the fact that Negroponte's career is so tied to security issues, the first question is whether national security is the Bush Administration's main concern regarding Mexico. Security in this instance has to do with the private armies of drug lords traveling back and forth between both countries; with massive immigration from Central America to Mexico and from there to the States; with unprecedented signs of political instability in Mexico; with a climate of growing social unrest due to an increase in criminal activity. In an interview with The Times Wednesday, CIA Director William H. Webster expressed concern about unrest in Mexico and said that it would receive "far more attention . . . than in the past."

Looking at Salinas' cabinet appointments, one would swear that both administrations share the same concerns about security, although each will approach the possible solutions separately. The question is whether Negroponte will be the best man to stand in the middle when the bilateral interests come together.

Many times it has been said that Mexico needs as U.S. ambassador someone with direct access to the centers of power in Washington. Negroponte knows how the State Department, the White House and Congress work. Therefore, the theory goes,

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he could work out good deals for Mexico.

Yet, as John Gavin's tenure showed, good access to Washington can be double-edged: Gavin helped to advance some of Mexico's positions regarding debt relief, but he proved to be a formidable adversary in the case of the U.S. drug-enforcement officer murdered in Mexico. Much of Mexico feels that Gavin's direct access to President Reagan caused a drug war of words, to Mexico's great disadvantage.

In the case of Negroponte, the Mexicans fear him more because of his reputed intelligence and efficiency; they seem to think that he is capable of destabilizing the country. Strangely enough, they see themselves as fragile as Honduras, which, with all due respect to the Hondurans, is not at all the case.

Perhaps the whole problem springs from two very different perceptions of international relations. The United States is accustomed to using its military and its money to influence other governments. Mexico believes firmly in nonintervention. The United States plays its power game in global terms; Mexico digs into its past to defend itself by reviving fears.

The Negroponte affair will force Mexico to accept the rules of the game in international relations as it is now played: Nothing is off-limits, and interventionism in the affairs of others often cannot be avoided.

One can only hope that this will lead to a formulation of a Mexican foreign policy that defines the national interest without a reference to the past and with pragmatism for its goals—not crying foul at every turn. Yes, Negroponte is the personification of interventionism, and Mexico should learn to live with him, control him and use him for its own benefit.

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